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Ahwatukee leaders want freeway voice

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Although officially still against the proposed South Mountain Freeway, Ahwatukee Foothills leaders say they want to weigh in on its design.

"The freeway's going in and I think serious consideration should be given to its design," said Van Braswell, member of the Ahwatukee Foothills Village Planning Committee. "The fight to not have it here has come and gone, and we need to ensure that we have a voice in the design."

Some Ahwatukee leaders are holding out hope for a "miracle" alternative route. Although not final, the proposed alignment along Pecos Road from Interstate 10 west through the community is the only one being considered by the Arizona Department of Transportation. The western alignment along 55th Avenue was set earlier this year.

The Gila River Indian Community's governing council has forbidden ADOT from even studying the possibility of building the 10-lane freeway on reservation land, just south of Ahwatukee's southern limits at Pecos Road.

Even if individual landowners agreed to such an alignment, the Tribal Council and ultimately the Bureau of Indian Affairs would have to sign off on the route.

That has left some members of Ahwatukee's planning committee wondering when, not if, the freeway would be built through the southeastern end of Phoenix behind South Mountain.

"It may not be inevitable, and a miracle could happen and it would end up on the Gila reservation, but at some point, it will be appropriate to see what kind of ideas are coming out of the design," said Mel Hannah, vice chairman of the committee.

Laurel Arndt, another committee member and a member of the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team, said the placement of the freeway appears to be 90 percent set but estimated its design is only 10 percent complete.

And that's where residents might have the most influence at this point, she said.

"The question for ADOT is: 'How can you expect us to support a freeway in our community if you don't tell us what it will look like?' " she said.

Arndt said it is frustrating for members of the freeway advisory committee and the community to wait for the results of an environmental impact statement being prepared by ADOT and expected sometime next year.

"I know this is uncomfortable to be sitting here in this holding pattern, but I'm not going to get worked up" until the environmental impact statement is done, she said.

Like other committee members, Arndt said she is interested in trying to influence the freeway's design as much as possible while reserving the right to oppose it in the end.

"We were screwed a long time ago when the freeway went from six lanes to 10

lanes," she said.

Initially, the freeway was to have been built with three lanes in each direction with room to expand in the median by another two lanes in each direction.

Doug Cole, the committee's chairman, said he worries that the group will be perceived as "softening our position" if it gets involved in talking about design.

But Arndt disagreed.

"It's about exploring your avenues," she said. "I don't want the freeway any more than anyone else. But let's see what the best- and worst-case scenarios are."

ADOT spokesman Matt Burdick said the agency is open to community members' opinions about freeway design elements such as aesthetics and amenities. For example, residents may want to advocate for a drainage basin to double as a public park, he said.

"The input that obviously we would welcome into this process is looking at ways to mitigate impacts associated with building the freeway," he said.

"They can still weigh in at a later date and say we still don't like it."

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